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Frailty and Flourishing: Good news for humanity

Response to Alister McGrath

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Alister McGrath's wide-ranging paper has done a brilliant job in raising the curtain on our conference and in identifying a number of very significant threads which will frame our discussion in the days ahead. In these few brief comments, I simply want to follow up on a number of those themes and offer some critical and I hope constructive observations.

I would like firstly to pursue the question of the relationship between theology and practice; secondly, to advance some comments on the practice of 'attentiveness' and the nature of virtue or the virtues; and finally, something about the connections between religion, well-being and flourishing.

In his paper, Alister McGrath tells us 'theology is seen at its best, and its most authentic, when ... directed towards the motivation and shaping of good ministerial practice' (p.1).

This will not come as a surprise to most of those within the BIAPT community and to readers of *Practical Theology*, who will already be familiar with what is sometimes called 'the turn to practice' in recent years, and reflected clearly in the literature on both sides of the Atlantic (Fulkerson, 2007; Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005). In fact, this more contemporary literature is prefigured by a debate reaching back nearly thirty years (Browning, 1983; Farley, 1983; Dyson, 1983). This reorientation in the discipline of Practical Theology locates it, as McGrath states, as a discourse which has something

important to say not only in about the character of ministry – as theologically informed and ecclesially rooted – but about the very nature of theology itself. Theology is something that is grounded in communities of practice and judged according to its outworkings: in the fruits of practical wisdom as it informs and deepens the life of faith. And perhaps it is helpful to identify two dimensions of the scope of Practical Theology here. Firstly, we can talk about ‘the theology of practice’, and Alister McGrath’s paper indicates clearly that Christian practice of whatever kind is always already grounded in, and nurtured by, understandings of God. It is how theology – or ‘talk about God’ is operationalised in practice.

But contemporary pastoral theologians are increasingly steering their discipline in a second direction, as something which is concerned with ‘the practice of theology’. This is reflected in the - more methodological literature which represents not only a turn to practice but a turn to method: it focuses on the activity of theological reflection (Thompson, 200x; Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005; Green, 2nd Edition, 2009) and on practical theology as a primary theological discipline (Veling, 2006). The ‘practice of theology’ relates to the way in which firstly, theology is performative and sacramental in nature; Christian assertions about God in the world, in Christ, are enacted in the practices of faith – worship, pastoral care, mission, lifestyle, corporate and individual. But increasingly, practical theologians are concerned to interrogate how theology as more formal, logical discourse is actually *done*: why doctrine emerges, and how theological claims are constructed out of the streams of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. For practical theologians, then, all theology is ‘practical’; but as a result of this recent

turn, they are concerned with nothing less than the *recontextualization* of Christian doctrine.

I'm not sure that Alister McGrath's paper fully acknowledges this second aspect or realizes its implications. If theology is thoroughly practical, then that means more than the theologian merely considering the 'impact' of their deliberations. Yet for too long that has been the predominant model, enshrined in the relationships between the different sub-disciplines of theology and beautifully summarized by Rick Osmer as a relay race in which philosophical, Biblical and historical scholarship each run their leg of the race, passing on the baton of knowledge until it goes to practical or pastoral theology for the final stage, tasked with 'bringing the baton across the finishing line to the church' (Osmer, 2008: 238). However, theology does not simply *end up* in action, the final stage of a process of putting theology into practice; but it actually *emerges* from practice, and embraces a methodological and epistemological model which moves from practice to theory to practice (Browning, 1991). Other voices have emphasized the way in which theology – talk about God – is a discipline whose very well-springs are in the 'quotidian' realities of everyday life (Miller-McLemore, 1999: 7~~9~~⁸).

So theology is about nurturing Christian practice, and of course, as Alister McGrath argues, that is about finding *meaning*, often amidst suffering. The church is certainly an interpretive community, then, a community of meaning, grounded in its own narratives, sacramental actions and values. But once again I think we would be missing a significant

emergent trend in the discipline if we did not see how practice is more than the tasks of thinking, believing and interpreting. This is not to be anti-intellectual, but simply to point out that as humans we inhabit metaphysical or symbolic worlds of meaning but also material and concrete worlds of physical phenomena. (Gorringe, 2004; Graham, 2007). Once again, I think the ‘canon’ of practical theology richly reflects this, since it is concerned with material, embodied action and not just linguistic or textual meaning. As a result, Stanley Fish’s perspective on interpretive communities might be regarded by a practical theologian as involving not only the interpretation of ‘texts’ in a conventional way, but with the ‘living human documents’ of everyday life in and beyond the Church (Miller-McLemore, 1999; Fulkerson, 2007).

So theology may be ‘a way of *seeing* the world’ but it is also a way of *being* a person of faith that is certainly value-laden and reflective, but is also material, embodied and conducted within sacred time and space. Such faithful practice is also a profoundly corporate and tradition-bound activity: it is not a solitary existential quest, nor is it undertaken independent of inherited values and presuppositions.

The question of method leads me to Alister McGrath’s second theme of attentiveness and attention, which he regards as central to the theological task. This resonates closely with current debates in Practical Theology, in which the practice of theological reflection is ordered towards the cultivation of Christian nurture, discipleship and mission (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, p.10-11) Mention of Iris Murdoch in Alister McGrath’s paper

prompts me to think of Aristotle and virtue ethics, which is – like theological reflection – about nurturing the habits of a guided and intentional life which seeks to shape itself towards the good and all that promotes human flourishing (*eudemonia*).

Jane Leach's recent discussion on attentiveness as a form of theological practice develops this very helpfully (Leach, 2007). Once more, the model of reflection is one of practice-theory/theology-practice. It begins with the immediate and the concrete, and suggests a way of encountering the world in terms of seeing, but also of listening, sensing and contemplating. Such heightened awareness does not forget that the one who sees is already deeply involved in the experience to which they attend: attentiveness comes not through the dispassionate gaze, but with a full immersion in the world, without pre-conception. This is a risky undertaking, and as Jane Leach implies, entails our stepping out of our comfort zones:

The method I am outlining ... deliberately seeks to style itself as a tool for spiritual discernment: to engage the embodied senses that belong to the interpretation of living human documents as well as intellectual faculties, and to engage theological perspectives with the broad issues of cultural and political life and not just with the pre-occupations of the religious. (Leach, 2007: 23).

Such a process of reflection involves an attentiveness to immanent experience but places it alongside other sources of wisdom, such as Scripture, tradition and culture, with an

emphasis ~~te~~on the voices that are excluded or overlooked. In the process of such a practice of theological reflection as paying attention, then, we cannot evade questions of how our own prejudgements may be distorting, rather than enlightening, our vision. We may not be able to see without a framework of meaning and prior commitment, but do we also need to make ourselves vulnerable to new ways of seeing? And might that not extend to the very framework of Christian tradition itself, in need of correctives to the distortions of racism, cultural imperialism and patriarchy?

This is relevant to our discussion of frailty and flourishing, for example. The feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen has argued that concepts of salvation within Western Christianity have actually been shaped by an ideology of ‘necrophilia’, or morbid fascination with death and a desire to escape the contingencies of embodiment and mortality (Jantzen, 1996). Salvation is equated with a ‘rescue’ – to use McGrath’s term – from the contingencies of the material world. Following philosophers such as Hannah Arendt and Elizabeth Anscombe, Jantzen contrast this with a concept of salvation as ‘flourishing’, grounded in an ethic of natality, or the affirmation of birth and life. For Jantzen, salvation is not to attempt an escape from a fallen and corrupt world, but to promote the values of new life, creativity and justice in ways that propel us towards a flourishing that anticipates how humanity might ‘become divine’ (Jantzen, 1998). This serves as a reminder that frailty and flourishing are not self-evident virtues and that for some, the Christian tradition may represent a partial or ambivalent inheritance. The ‘spectacles’ of tradition may sometimes function more as blinkers. We must learn to see without prejudice, to see from the perspective of the ‘Other’.

Finally, on our third theme, of religion, flourishing and well-being, there is more to say than time and space allows. There is no question, however, that due to the influence of Richard Layard and others, the question of happiness and well-being has attained wide political currency (Layard, 2005; Michaelson *et al.*, 2009; Coyte *et al.*, 2007). Research suggests that religious people report higher levels of well-being, satisfaction and psychological resilience and low levels of morbidity. But this is not some facile link between happiness and prayer. Layard's seven indicators of well-being¹ are about individuals who are well-connected with family, co-workers and neighbours, inhabiting communities with high levels of social capital and strong values – such as churches. Our mental maps emerge from and are sustained by collectives who not only 'preach' particular visions of human flourishing but attempt to practise them too. This extends to all those who are active in their community in whatever way, but particularly those who do so within a strong altruistic or activist framework (Borgonovi, 2008).

So once again, we encounter the very corporate and collective nature of a search for meaning, or the good life well-lived, taking place within 'an ecology of virtue' (Graham, 2010). Human flourishing extends beyond the personal to the inter- and trans-personal dimensions, reflecting the spiritual and transcendental dimensions of human well-being (Atherton *et. al*, 2010; Coyte *et al.*, 2007).

Thank you, Professor McGrath, for your stimulating and wide-ranging paper. I'm encouraged by its 'turn to practice' but hope that this is about the beginnings and origins of theology in practice, as well as its applications. For this conference, my wish is that together we will cultivate modes of attentiveness that nurture ways of seeing, being and becoming that foster 'life in all its fullness'.

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¹ Layard's seven indices of well-being are: 1. Stable and satisfying family relationships; 2. income, although increasing wealth above a certain limit seems to engender diminishing marginal returns; 3. work: not just as provider of financial security, but as source of self-worth; 4. networks of community and friends; 5. good health; 6. personal freedom; and 7. 'personal values and philosophy of life'.